

Naaman's Strange Journey of Healing

A sermon by John Strommen on 2 Kings 5:1-15 Nov. 4, 2018

The story of the healing of Naaman is an ancient story, but it speaks to today in some very poignant ways. To appreciate it though, we need to take some time and explore the narrative itself. First, a bit of background. This takes place during the period when Israel was divided into two kingdoms. (show map) So you had Judah in the south, where Bethlehem was, and Israel was the northern kingdom, where Samaria was the capital city. Our story takes place in the northern kingdom, which was often in conflict with neighboring Syria, sometimes called Aram.

Our story begins with Naaman, who was the commander of the army of Aram. He was a great man in his country and held in great esteem by his king because they had recently defeated Israel. There was only one problem with the "mighty warrior" Naaman: he had leprosy. This was not only a fatal disease, but it carried a social stigma as well.

Naaman has a slave – a young girl - taken captive during a raid into Israel, and this girl served Naaman's wife. Think for a minute of the tragedy of this girl's existence. Nonetheless, one day the girl said to Naaman's wife, "if only my lord, Naaman, could see the prophet from Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy." Obviously this was Elisha. So, this slave girl wants to help the man who took her captive to get well.

Apparently, Naaman's wife took the girl's suggestion as a legit and passed it on to Naaman, who also took it seriously. He told his king what the girl had said, and the king said to Naaman, "Go to the king of Israel, and I will send a letter to him as well."

Anything seem amiss about this plan? The girl said the prophet of Samaria could heal Naaman, not the king of Israel! Maybe it's protocol and you have to go through the king. Let's see.

So Naaman and his entourage went to the king of Israel, with the letter, along with a treasure chest of silver, gold and garments.

So, he gets to the king of Israel -the king who he just defeated in battle - and gave him the letter, along with the gifts. The king pulls out the letter and here is what it says: "*When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.*" OK, so there's no mention of the prophet here. They pretty much expect the king to heal him. What got lost in the message, I wonder? Hopefully, the king will take it in stride.

It says that after the king read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "*I'm supposed to cure this man of leprosy?! Who do they think I am, God? Can I decide life and death? They're obviously making an impossible demand that I cannot satisfy, so they can have an excuse for another battle!*"

Apparently, word got to Elisha about Naaman's visit, the king's letter, and of course, the King of Israel's reaction. So, Elisha sent a message to his king, "*Why have you torn your clothes? Send him to me and he can meet a real prophet.*"

This seemed like a good plan to the king. So Naaman, with his war chariots and horses, went to Elisha's house, waiting outside the entrance. But Elisha, who asked for this visit, didn't even come out to see his

powerful guest. He sent a messenger to Naaman, saying, *'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.'*

Naaman was furious! He expected the Elisha come to him, call loudly upon the name of the Lord, wave his hand over his affliction and shizaam! Leprosy gone. "Why would I wash myself in the puny River Jordan? The rivers of my home are better than the rivers of Israel! Why don't I just go there and clean myself if that's the answer?"

And sure enough, for anyone who's been to the River Jordan, it's not the Mississippi. More like a muddy creek. So Naaman said, "I'm outta here!"

But then his servants approached him. By the way, a servant here meant slave. So, this is the second slave who will have something to say about the outcome of this story. The slave said, "Master, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, you surely would have done it. Here he simply says, 'wash in this river and be clean.' I mean, why not try it? It won't cost you anything."

So, these slaves kind of confront Naaman. They had guts, don't you think?

And for the second time, Naaman took the word of a slave and acted upon it. He went down to the River Jordan and washed himself 7 times, just as Elisha told him to do. And his flesh was restored to that of a young boy. He was cured.

Then Naaman returned to Elisha, stood before him and said, "now I know that your God is the only true God. Please accept a gift from your servant."

What do we make of this story?

There are three really important points here. First, God heals, and God heals unexpected individuals.

Here are some artistic depictions of Naaman's healing in widely varying time periods and styles.

- This one's from Watchtower, I believe.
- This stained glass panel is one of many in the Museum in London that comes from a Cistercian abbey, c.1510-30.
- B&W print of Naaman bathing by Matthauw Merian in The British Museum
- Jonathan Miller oil paintings abstract feel
- The Prophet Elisha cleansing Naaman by Giorgio Vasari - Reproduction Oil Painting

So, first, this story tells us God is a healer, and his desire to heal extends beyond his chosen people. He healed not only a foreigner, but an oppressor of Israel. Just when we think God only wants good things for me and my kind - you know, those who deserve it - God goes and does something like this. As humans, we certainly don't think that way. But this is a God who crosses any boundaries we think might restrain God.

Is it any wonder this God would eventually empty his own self of power to become one of us. Why? To heal the broken relationship between God and humans. In doing so, we become part of the life of God. It's why we celebrate All Saints Sunday. God's eternal life is yours!

Second, notice who the heroes were in this story? The servants. This is the way God often tells his stories.

- Do you know who this painting depicts? The slave girl who loved the man who imprisoned her. Is this what it means to love your enemies?
- How about this one? The slaves who intervened when Naaman was having a meltdown, and they talked some sense into him.

But many different people played key roles here in God's healing story, people with very little religious cred. Yet God does God's work through them. There's Naaman's wife who respected the slave girl and shared her sentiments, to the foreign king who tried to help but missed the point about who to visit, to the grumpy prophet who didn't even come out to welcome his guest. These are the kinds of people God works through in this world, so don't ever use the excuse that God doesn't work through someone like me. Not true. Never was. You and I are called to tasks everyday – tasks that make a difference for someone.

So, if someone is in trouble or ill - and maybe you don't even like them – and you have a chance to suggest something to them that might help, well, maybe that's God calling you.

- Finally, Pieter De Grebber did a painting of Elisha Refusing Gifts from Naaman.

You may notice what happened with Naaman in his evolution during this story. He began by trying to purchase his health with gold and silver. He had the resources, why not? But it did nothing for him with the king of Israel, except send him into a panic. And then when he brought gifts to Elisha, Elisha had no interest in his gifts. But Elisha, acting on God's behalf, did have an interest in healing Naaman, enemy though he was. And so he did.

In the end, Naaman still offered a gift. Now his gift was a gift of thanks. A gift of recognition. The recognition that the God of Israel was a God of healing and life. This is why the person of faith offers up gifts: not so much to purchase something or gain favors, but to give thanks. I hope you also give because you're thankful. Amen.